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SARTRE AND THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN NATURE REVISITED

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Abstract

In this paper I propose to look exclusively at the philosophical thought of Sartre and to situate it in relation to the wider European tradition and other thinkers, especially Heidegger. The purpose arises from the general acceptance of Sartre's philosophy in the British academic environment as an example of a contradictory account of freedom and human nature. Such a reading, I shall contend, is based on a mistaken appropriation of Sartre's concept of existence which has been divorced from its origins in the modern European tradition and the over-determination of the meaning of freedom as uncaused spontaneity. To look at Sartre without reference to his influences such as Kant, Hegel and Heidegger and without considering his later works is the reason that this prevalent, mistaken reading is still accepted in many quarters.

§1| Introduction[1]

Sartre's account of freedom is still widely understood as a version of metaphysical libertarianism, a doctrine which asserts that the human being is completely and unconditionally free. This prevalent reading is largely due to the influence still held by Mary Warnock's interpretation of his early texts and her privilege of the role of anguish in his thought.[2] The true doctrine of Sartrean philosophy is, according to this position, the idea that

[1] This paper was originally published in 2003 in *Sartre Studies International*, 9(1), 1-20. Reprinted by kind permission of the publishers, Berghahn Books.

[2] M. Warnock, *The Philosophy of Sartre*, London: Hutchinson and Co., 1965 (Hereafter PS) Her book is the most comprehensively argued account of Sartre's libertarianism and this "traditional" Sartrean freedom can also be found in W. Desan, *The Tragic Finale* New York: Harper, 1960 and S. Morgenbesser and J. Walsh, *Free Will* Englewood Clifts: Prentice-Hall, 1962. It is appropriated unreflectively by non-Sartrean scholars – see, for example, J. Neu, "Divided Minds: Sartre's "Bad Faith" critique of Freud" in *Review of Metaphysics* 1988, 42, 79-101. It also causes confusion in Sartrean scholars, see J. Simont, "Sartrean Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, and forces P. Caws to completely separate the freedom of spontaneity and freedom of action as though they were distinct phenomena in ch. 8 of *Sartre* London:

man is absolutely and unconditionally free and that determinism is false. This leads to a tension in *Being and Nothingness* between, on the one hand, the self as an uncaused and ultimately meaningless spontaneity; and, on the other, an account of human nature as the original project. Warnock accuses Sartre of resolving this tension in his later works by betraying freedom and re-introducing determinism into his account of human nature, namely Marxist historical materialism. Her book makes it possible to speak of an early and a late Sartre; the existentialist, and the Marxist.

However, this approach over-determines the meaning of freedom in Sartre's texts as uncaused spontaneity when it is possible to offer an alternative interpretation by returning to the anachronistic idea of human nature. Sartre openly states that "there is no human nature" (EH 29), but this is to be understood in terms of his whole presentation of human freedom and not just in relation to his rejection of determinism.[3] The aim of this paper is not to deny the libertarianism inherent in Sartre's account, but to argue that it is but the most basic level on which a more sophisticated account of free-will is erected. An examination of the influence of the German idealist tradition and, especially, Heidegger on Sartre's ideas, will hopefully demonstrate the importance of the notion of freedom as self-determination.

§2| Sartre's libertarianism

Most interpretations of Sartre's work begin from his contribution to the freedom-determinism debate: of the three characters in the debate – that is, the determinist, the compatibilist and the libertarian – Sartre offers his readers the most extreme and consistent account of the libertarian position. The determinist holds that the human being is a physical object like all others, subject to the physical laws of the universe and, once all the laws are known and the initial conditions revealed, the human being is as predictable in his or her behaviour as a billiard ball. Free-will is merely an illusion. The compatibilist agrees that man

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Routledge, 1979. For a good overview of the whole problem of defining Sartrean freedom, refer to D. Detmar, *Freedom as a Value* Chicago: Open Court, 1986.

[3] Abbreviations to the works of Sartre are as follows: TE - *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936) trans. F. Williams, and R. Kirkpatrick, New York: Octagon Books, 1972; N - *Nausea* (1938) trans. R. Baldick, London: Penguin, 1965; BN - *Being and Nothingness* (1943)trans. H. Barnes, London: Routledge, 1989 AJ – *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1944) trans. G. Becker, New York: Schoken Books, 1948; EH - *Existentialism and Humanism* (1945) trans. P. Mairet, London: Methuen, 1987; CF - "Cartesian Freedom" (1947) in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* trans. A. Michelson, London: Hutchinson, 1968; NE – *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1947-8) trans. D. Pellauer, London: University of Chicago Press, 1992; SM – *The Search for a Method* (1960) trans. H. Barnes, London: Methuen, 1963; CDR – *The Critique of Dialectical Reason vol. 1* (1960) trans. A. Sheridan-Smith, London: Verso, 1991.

is subject to causal law since he is motivated by desires, but that freedom is the power to satisfy desire and so one ought to understand freedom as freedom from restraint. For the libertarian, the human being is free because he can choose his own values and projects. Human beings and objects are just different types of things; humans are able to determine their own actions through an act of volition which is uncaused.[4] Sartre is the proper name most commonly associated with the position of the libertarian as he rejects any deterministic theory of action and, equally, he does not accept compatibilism: if freedom means uncaused, to describe freedom as acting on one's desires without impediment is to say one's action is caused by a desire or a personality trait. (BN 433-442) To be free is to reject all possible explanations of knowing, doing or being which refer to something prior and external to consciousness.

The above account of freedom can be found most clearly in *The Transcendence of the Ego* and, at that stage, Sartre was concerned with capturing, not defining, the nature of metaphysical freedom, that is the essence of consciousness. It is in *Being and Nothingness* that the moral consequences of his extreme libertarianism begin to be felt with regard to responsibility. In asking for what things am I responsible, the agent asks himself of all the events in the world which can I claim as "mine." A very unsophisticated determinist would answer absolutely nothing: the agent is nothing more than a complicated billiard ball. The compatibilist would answer: all those acts which are motivated by my own desires. Both accounts, of course, have their problems: the former because it seems to negate far too much of our actual experience, the latter because it cannot explain why we conceive of coercion as a case of unfree action.

Sartre, though, would respond by saying that the agent is responsible for every act (and one must remember that knowing, too, is a species of acting for Sartre). One cannot claim that "I couldn't help it", "That's just the way I am" or "It's my duty" in order to negate one's personal responsibility for what one has done. Any attempt to avoid responsibility, to deny one's freedom, is bad faith and this is the morality that lies at the heart of *Being and Nothingness*. Bad faith is a denial of freedom, a denial of who we are, it is to deny the very dignity of humanity. The realisation that the agent is solely responsible for his acts leads to

[4] For a comprehensive overview of all these positions, refer to G. Watson, (ed.) *Free Will* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

anguish, the dread of being free, and it is this revelation which Warnock takes to be so significant in Sartre's work. Anguish captures the nature of the human being condemned to be free, knowing that he must decide and choose and that these choices are his and his alone.

Yet, it is this extreme libertarianism which gives rise to the paradox of freedom. Responsibility was defined as those events which originate from "me" and a compatibilist is able to describe an empirical self, a personality or storehouse of desires, and restructure the object "me" which is in the world. The libertarian, of course, rejects any causal relationship between an empirical self and action. When the libertarian says that "I chose to x" what is the object which can stand in for the "I"?

One could, perhaps, follow the libertarianism of Kant and equate the unity of "I" with the rational self as opposed to the phenomenal self: the agent is responsible when he acts from reasons rather than when he is motivated by empirical causes such as desires.[5] However, the extreme nature of Sartre's libertarianism can be heard in these words: "… the root of all Reason is to be sought in the depths of the free act." (CF 183; see also BN 570) Kant, after all, talks of two different orders of causality, one of reason and one of the phenomenal world. If one were capable of understanding the principles of reason, then the right action could be predicted. This is to replace the free agent with reason and it is not the agent who chooses but reason itself. For Sartre, this is akin to positing a law of consciousness which is absurd. A law of consciousness would be known by a consciousness and, if it is known by a consciousness, then that consciousness is prior to it. (BN xxvi-xxxii)

Sartre, then, absolutely rejects all forms of causality, including the differentiation of the self into rational and phenomenal, à la Kant. It is the spontaneous nature of consciousness which makes room for a coherent notion of choice: for a choice to be mine and mine alone, it must not arise from a prior character, from a given desire, form the way the world is or was, or, finally, from the dictates of reason. For a choice to be authentic and free the agent must negate these constraints and consciousness has to be spontaneous. And here is the problem: if the choice is spontaneous, is it not better understood as an event since the "I" which chooses

[5] This is a very unsatisfactory account of Kant's picture, but it serves its purpose here. For the full account, see *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* trans. M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

is nothingness and not identical with the empirical ego which is "me"? What is the difference between this uncaused event and choosing an ice-cream by lottery, that is placing my hand in a bucket of tickets with flavours written on them and picking one?[6] Perhaps one can say in an absurd universe, there is no difference, but then Sartre has to explain the phenomenon of anguish differently, for if the "me" of "my" choice is nothingness, then who is responsible and who feels anguish? Who is the self which connects all the acts as mine? Freedom understood in this manner seems to lose its relationship to responsibility which is crucial for the experience of anguish.

Being and Nothingness is Sartre's attempt to offer a resolution to this problem because the subject is no longer a metaphysical abstraction employed to reveal the structures of being human (as it was in the earlier works), but it is characterised as a particular person living in the world. (BN 3) And what defines a person as opposed to an isolated consciousness is simply continuity over time: this series of acts is "me." Thus, *Being and Nothingness*, in its introduction and first two parts, revises and elaborates the account of metaphysical freedom Sartre had already described in the earlier works. In parts three and four, he begins to offer an answer to the problem of continuity: the original project is a universal, fundamental structure of being human. The original project dictates that each act has a meaning in relation to a consciousness which is constructing itself in the face of other consciousnesses (being-for-others).

Warnock describes the original project as man's desire to possess others and the world, but these are only manifestations of a deeper structure. Why is it that consciousness seeks to possess other consciousnesses and the world? In order to be something and not nothing; in order to be fixed, essential and free of anguish; in order to be what it is not. Sartre's own description bears this out:

> The goal in short is to overtake that being which flees itself while being what it is in the mode of not-being and which flows on while being its own flow, which escapes between its own fingers; the goal is to make of it a *given*, a given which finally *is what it is*; the problem is to gather together in a unity of one this unachieved

[6] Sartre himself is well aware of this. He criticises libertarianism as gratuitous on pp. 436-437 of BN, but muddles it somewhat with compatibilism.

> totality which is unachieved only because it is to itself its own non-achievement, to escape from the sphere of perpetual reference which has to be a reference to itself, and – precisely because it has escaped from the chains of this reference to itself – to *make it be* as a seen reference – that is, a reference which is what it is. (BN 153)

Continuity or personality is postulated in an account of human nature which Sartre believes is consistent with his description of consciousness: to found oneself as that being which is recognisably free through a series of acts that demonstrate this undeniably to the other. The metaphysical freedom of *The Transcendence of the Ego* becomes a practical freedom of the person in situation:

> Human reality can not receive its ends, as we have seen, either from outside or from so-called inner "nature". It chooses them and by this very choice confers upon them a transcendent existence as the external limits of its projects. From this point of view – and if it is understood that the existence of *Dasein* precedes and commands its essence – human reality in and through its very upsurge decides to define its own being by its ends. It is therefore the positing of my ultimate ends which characterizes my being and which is identical with the sudden thrust of freedom which is mine. (BN 443)[7]

It is at this point in the description of being human that Warnock poses her famous challenge: Sartre has created an unacceptable tension between, on the one hand, freedom as uncaused spontaneity and, on the other, a universal account of human nature. No matter how thin this general theory of man is, according to her, Sartre is guilty of reintroducing an essence into man's being and contradicting his own condition of freedom:

> What can be meant by saying that we choose ourselves, or that we choose how to live in our peculiar circumstances and situation, if we are committed, by being human, to a general pattern of behaviour such as Sartre has described? Sartre accuses Freud of denying human freedom by basing his method of analysis of human behaviour on the supposition that we are determined by our past experiences to behave as we do. But his method of analysis, in so far as it has any definite basis at all, must rest on the equally deterministic assumption that we

[7] This passage continues: "And this thrust is an existence; it has nothing to do with an essence or with a property of a being which would be engendered conjointly with an idea." This distinction between existence and being will become significant as the reader will soon see.

> form the projects we do because of our commitment to possess others and the world. (PS 126)

And how was this tension to be resolved? The standard interpretation states that Sartre negated the freedom of the particular individual for his account of human nature which was to eventually embody Marxist doctrine. Sartre betrayed his existentialist roots in order to make his account consistent: there is an *early Sartre* – the existentialist and the exponent of an extreme (if contradictory) libertarianism – and a *late Sartre* who reveals the problems with that position and opts for Marxism instead.

§3| The alternative reading: a Heideggerean Sartre

It is possible to offer an alternative, equally plausible interpretation of Sartrean freedom which retains the concept's centrality in his work, but also proposes continuity between the psychological and sociological levels of meaning. The established schism in Sartre's thought is most comprehensively championed in Warnock's book and a couple of general statements made there are extremely revealing. First, for all her continued references to Sartre's anti-Cartesianism, her book often works against this overall interpretation, relying too heavily on a parallel between the two thinkers: "Sartre, like all French philosophers, treats Descartes as the father of the subject, and "Cogito ergo sum", Descartes" supposedly indubitable foundation for his whole system, as somehow containing the germ of all truth within itself." (PS 13) This is true, but, for Sartre, "Cogito ergo sum" is understood as "We must begin from the subjective." (EH 26) It is only to assert that the explanation of any phenomenon must include and be grounded in the consciousness of that phenomenon. For there to be phenomena, one must be experiencing and if one is experiencing, one exists. This is a familiar transcendental argument that, for Sartre, proves that if there is consciousness, then there must exist a pre-reflective cogito, which is consciousness of being conscious of x. This falls far short of Descartes' mind or thinking substance and, yet, Warnock manages to mistakenly allow a latent dualism to corrupt her presentation of Sartre's theory of mind: "The duality of mind and body, of physical thing and mental thing, is essential to human beings and determines their behaviour in many ways. For other people I am, at first and immediately, a Being-in-itself. For myself I am, naturally, a Being-for-itself. And together these two modes of being combine to define the third mode – Being-for-others." (PS 66-7) This quotation contains obvious errors: one, it is not clear that first and immediately I am a being-in-itself for others. Others

are immediately and pre-reflectively different from being-in-itself for Sartre. More significantly, there is no dualism in Sartre's thought between thinking substance and physical substance. There is only Being and consciousness and the two do not form a duality because consciousness is nothingness. It is a strange duality indeed which holds that there are two types of things in the world, one which is being and the other which is nothing. Also, if the dualism is constituted by being-for-itself and being-in-itself, how then is one supposed to comprehend the third mode: being-for-others? Warnock does not explicitly call Sartre a dualist, but the implication is latent in her interpretation. Unfortunately, the interpretation became standard and being-for-itself and being-in-itself were conveniently mapped on to mind and body.

Any alternative reading of Sartre's account of subjectivity has to return to the relationship between these concepts and their anti-Cartesian origin. A parenthetical comment by Warnock reveals why her reading may be inadequate:

> (I shall not, incidentally, say anything at all about the origins of these expressions or their history in Hegelian and German idealist philosophy in general. Sartre owes a very great deal to Hegel, and also to Heidegger. But these philosophers are themselves so exceedingly obscure that more would be lost than gained in trying to trace the debts and the corruptions, the likenesses and the differences, which are, however, certainly there to be traced by anyone who has the patience to undertake it.) (PS 42)[8]

Warnock's mistake resides in refusing to think through these connections since it is easy to frame Sartre as a dualist if one thinks of these concepts as entities rather than as modes of being. Consciousness comports itself – that is, behaves – towards being and this is crucial to understanding his anti-Cartesianism which – in *Being and Nothingness* – is derived largely from Heidegger. More significantly, Sartre's anti-Cartesianism explains why he assumes that he can offer an account of freedom which is compatible with a universal structure of human being.

[8] She is even more revealing when she states: "I confess to finding Heidegger both unintelligible and unattractive…" p. 71.

The first departure for an existentialism is to hold existence precedes essence: any knowledge at all (any relationship with being) is only possible if there is a subject. This is a familiar transcendental argument which one finds in Kant: the unity of apperception is proven by the fact that moments of consciousness must have an a priori unity otherwise synthesis would not be possible.[9] It is in Heidegger's thought that the unity of apperception, which for Kant is derived from knowledge, becomes ontologically prior.[10] If there exists an a priori unity, surely the way in which this exists determines the objects of experience and any ontology or metaphysics must begin with this: each different entity has a different way of being known, it is characterised differently due to the subject's behaviour towards it. Although I say "I know myself", "I know Paul" and "I know that is a table" with the same verb, what I am doing – and knowing is a type of doing – is different in each case. The modes of being Sartre describes are derived from this approach.

Dasein – Heidegger's substitution for the Cartesian Cogito and the Kantian unity of apperception – is constituted by three knowing relationships. (1) Dasein is *concerned* about things, they matter because they can either fulfil or frustrate its projects or desires. This is to know things as either ready-to-hand or, in a more reified sense, as present-at-hand. Thus, the way in which Dasein exists – its projects, aspirations and motivations – are prior to knowledge of these entities. This, of course, loosely corresponds to Sartre's being-in-itself, or rather being-in-itselfs.[11] (2) Dasein is with-others in a relationship of *solicitude*: we share a world with other consciousnesses who also exist as projects, structuring the world as a matrix for-themselves. This loosely corresponds to Sartre's being-for-others, but Sartre is – in *Being and Nothingness* – pessimistic about the possibility of authentic recognition by others and

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[9] For Kant's full argument, see his "Transcendental Deduction" in part two of the Analytic in *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. J. Meiklejohn, (revised by V. Politis) London: Everyman, 1993. Basically, for knowledge as the synthesis of assertions to be possible, it must be presupposed that these moments all belong to the same knowing self-consciousness (the unity of apperception): (I know) that all men are mortal; (I know) Socrates was a man; Therefore, (I know) Socrates was mortal. The I has to be identical through all these moments. If Bill knows exclusively that all men are mortal and Bob knows exclusively Socrates was a man, neither would be able to reach the conclusion of the syllogism on their own.

[10] Dasein is ontologically prior to entities, but not Being itself. Sartre denies that the for-itself in ontologically prior to the in itself (BN, p. 619) but this actually underlines a confusion in his work. Sartre uses being-in-itself in an equivocal way: to refer to Being and to entities, he should perhaps talk about Being-in-itself and beings-in-themselves, though he often uses "being-in-itselfs."

[11] See footnote 10. The reason why nausea is my way of knowing is because it refers to Being in itself. The nearest emotional comportment to being-in-itself would be the coefficient of adversity.

replaces Heidegger's picture with a more antagonistic one, hence solicitude is substituted by shame. (3) Finally, Dasein *cares* about itself. It is immediately related to itself as that which cares who it is, what it does, and who it becomes. This is the immediate way in which one can understand Sartre's being-for-itself and again his emotional characterisation is more prosaic: anguish.[12]

Of these three modes of consciousness, of knowing, the two which most closely map on to Sartre's account are concern and care. Heidegger says that it is pertinent and useful to apply the verb "to be" to being-in-itself and the verb "to exist" to being-for-itself, since the former answers the question "What is it?" and the latter answers the question "Who is it?[13] Common to both is Dasein, without Dasein there would be no knowing, yet knowing in each case is a different type of behaviour. One commits an ontological error, for Heidegger, when one attempts to know consciousness as a "what" rather than a "who"[14] Cartesianism commits this error as does any account of human nature given in terms apt to a "what" rather than a "who", that is attempts to describe the human subject in terms of properties or as a thing present-at-hand with a fixed, eternal essence.

Who, then, is Dasein? Dasein is that which endures through the fleeting moments of consciousness in order to synthesise it and when we wish to characterise this synthesis it amounts to nothing more than a totalised system of moments of consciousness. It is self-determination as a structure of existence: I exist as my possibilities, or as Heidegger characterises it: "I myself am mine." (BT ¶13) Whereas, entities are determined from without by the projection of Dasein, Dasein projects itself. The structure of the pre-reflective consciousness makes itself an object but can never grasp itself. (BT ¶25) This entails that it is impossible to understand it as an object or as an essence (a what), one has to comprehend it as an existence, as a way of being (a who). Sartre appropriates Heidegger's insights in his

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[12] For Heidegger, of course, anguish/anxiety is an ontic form of care, just as care is an ontic form of being-towards-death. See *Being and Time* trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992 ¶¶39-42; 51-53. (Hereafter BT.)

[13] Sartre's own equivalent can be found in BN 25 and 123.

[14] It is an equal error to try to know a table as a "who". One way to crystallise Heidegger's point is when one uses scientific concepts to explain a work of art. They are just not apt. In G. McCulloch, *Using Sartre* London: Routledge, 1994 p. 57, the author feels compelled to distinguish "to BE" from "to be", but makes no mention of the roots of this in existentialism.

presentation of being-for-itself, which then becomes his equivalent for the Kantian unity of apperception. There has to exist an a priori unity of consciousness otherwise this particular moment of consciousness would be impossible and this a priori unity makes possible the empirical, synthetic unity which is *me* in the world. (BN 103) The original project is the attempt by self-consciousness on the part of itself to make itself identical with its unifying process which is impossible, but necessary since it is its essential structure:

> There is an indivisible, indissoluble being – definitely not a substance supporting its qualities like particles of being, but a being which is existence through and through… This is what Heidegger expressed very well when he wrote (though speaking of Dasein, not of consciousness): "The "how" (*essentia*) of this being, so far as it is possible to speak of it generally, must be conceived in terms of its existence (*existentia*)." This means that consciousness is not produced as a particular instance of an abstract possibility but that in rising to the center of being, it creates and supports its essence – that is, the synthetic order of its possibilities. (BN xxxi)[15]

Warnock understands Sartre's for-itself as an *essence* like the Cartesian cogito, when it should most properly be understood as an *existence*. She commits an ontological error when she assumes that the original project is an account of human nature as a "what". If the human being is a "what", a thing present-at-hand, then one can apply the category of causality to it and the paradox of freedom arises. However, Sartre is describing the "who", the fundamental way in which human-being exists in the world. In other words, the metaphysical account of the for-itself is being applied to the situation. Warnock's reading is dependent on the account of *The Transcendence of the Ego* and the first third of *Being and Nothingness* being extrapolated into a social situation, whereas Sartre is offering an account of how such a metaphysical entity exists in a social situation. He is moving his description from the abstract level to the concrete level.

The supposed tension in Sartre's text between a universal account of human nature and his account of uncaused freedom rests on this ontological error. It is to describe the subject in terms of a thing when Sartre repeatedly asserts that it is nothing. The original project needs

[15] Sartre also offers an aesthetic way to understand this unity, see N 252 and TE 73-74.

to be understood as a fuller elaboration of self-consciousness's knowledge of itself. Things *are*, that is, have, essences: a table is x, y, z. Self-consciousness *exists*, that is, is free. How do I know myself as freedom? I know I am in anguish, that this anguish reveals that I want to negate my possibilities and become a thing which is free. The original project is an elaboration of *who* we are and a description of the way we know ourselves and deal with our freedom. Freedom is, after all, the futile pursuit of essence, of a negation trying to negate itself.

To describe Sartre as a libertarian is misleading because the spontaneous nature of consciousness is not the essence of freedom, but the pre-condition of choice. The freedom of consciousness is indeterminism and this indeterminism guarantees the notion of choice.[16] In order for choice to be meaningful, this freedom has to be elaborated more fully as self-determination or the idea of personal freedom: "Thus from its first arising, consciousness by the pure nihilating movement of reflection makes itself *personal*; for what confers personal existence on a being is not the possession of an Ego – which is only the sign of a personality – but it is the fact that the being exists for itself as presence to itself." (BN 103; see also EH 29) I am free when I am the one who chooses the content of my will, when I act on my volitions and not those imposed on me from without. The original project cannot be understood in terms of freedom if this means only uncaused, but it is a good characterisation of the human condition if freedom as self-determination is a fundamental structure of the self, especially if the one who exists, exists in an absurd universe. Each of my acts fills me with being for which I am responsible, yet this "me" can always be negated, always be overcome and "I", too, am responsible for this fact. Sartre's conception of self-determination is unique and original because it embodies the "necessity of contingency": it is necessary that I determine myself but any determination is contingent since it has no ultimate meaning. (BN 327) My being refers only to me and this is the impossible burden of responsibility that gives rise to anguish.

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[16] Such an assertion can once more be traced back to German Idealism and Hegel. See *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* trans. H. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 §§5 and 7. There is another story to be told about Hegel's influence on Sartre, but it is a much more subtle and reflective engagement on the latter's part than his appropriation of Heidegger's approach. It is thus a story which requires a more general investigation than a brief article can offer.

Sartre's account of the original project is not exactly an account of human nature as Warnock supposes, it is a characterisation of the human condition, of being human. To read the original project as having a causal relationship with the particular acts of the individual is to apply a category which is mistaken. Acts are not determined, things present-at-hand are determined (this is, at least, one of their possible ways to be) whereas acts are an expression of being-for-itself, they are self-determined.

§4| Whose reading?

Given the length and style of *Being and Nothingness*, it would be possible to identify passages which supported one or other of the readings elaborated above. It is, therefore, more pertinent to point to general ways in which the Heideggerean reading might offer a better understanding of Sartre's philosophical canon. I shall do this in two ways: first, by demonstrating that the paradox of freedom and the supposed tension within *Being and Nothingness* is resolved without ceding either the notion of consciousness as spontaneity or the fundamental structure of the project. (§§4.1 and 4.2) Second, I shall question Warnock's explicit accusation that the sociological concepts of Sartre's later works do not grow out of, but rather negate, his earlier psychological concepts. (§5)

§4.1| Warnock's charge of determinism

Sartre's extreme libertarianism committed him to describing consciousness as uncaused spontaneity, but to describe an act as "mine" means nothing unless there exists "me" which can be identified as the cause of that act. Therefore, in order to justify his own account of anguish and responsibility, Sartre offered a universal account of being human which operates by creating a unity of self. Acts are not gratuitous but are to be understood in terms of an ongoing project to be in-itself-for-itself. This clearly brings in the second sense of freedom as self-determination: "Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to *make itself* instead of *to be*." (BN 440; see also 23, 34-5) Sartre then sets himself the task of applying his account of the human condition to particular cases and it is in doing this that he sees the possibility of an existentialist psycho-analysis. This is supposedly where Warnock's criticism bites deepest:

> Of course, it may truly be said that absolutely any method of analysis, if it is designed to explain human behaviour in terms other than superficial or common-sense terms, must do so in the light of some *general* theory. This is what such an explanation consists in. And there cannot be a *general* theory of human nature which does not commit its holder to some general views about how human beings necessarily behave. And so from the very outset Sartre, as well as Freud and any one else who undertakes the task of analysis, is committed to a certain degree of determinism. (PS 126-7)

Acts, according to Warnock, cannot be absolutely free because they are caused by the general human desire to be in-itself-for-itself. However, her reading only works if the "human" *is* rather than *exists*, which is to say, the human is a thing like a chair or a bottle with properties and/or tendencies. Only because this is to think of a human in terms of what Heidegger calls a thing present-at-hand is it possible to apply those categories (such as causality) which one applies to chairs, bottles, et cetera.

If it is true that Sartre is proposing a description of the human as a thing, then his proposal is useless since it serves little or no use as an explanatory theory. Warnock is aware of this, citing it as a reason why Freud's account of analysis is more satisfying, since his theory can explain actions whereas Sartrean analysis cannot. Any general theory needs to be able to make predictions which either support or falsify the theory. Freudian analysis can ideally investigate the particular details of an individual's life (the initial conditions), add in some general desires from its account of human nature (universal laws) and generate a range of predictions. It is obviously far more complicated than this ideal presentation, but it is possible. The Sartrean analyst can only predict that freedom will be expressed in a general project to be in-itself-for-itself; that is, he predicts nothing.[17]

Sartre was no fool. Warnock's charge of determinism just does not hold water because if one takes Sartre's account of human nature as an explanatory theory, it is useless. The general theory of the in-itself-for-itself has to be serving an alternative role in Sartre's complete picture. Warnock's challenge only applies if one assumes consciousness is a being

[17] It has been suggested to me that Sartre's long biographies demonstrate the explanatory power of his theory. The problem is, I feel, that we are running together the ideas of strong, causal explanation and comprehension; that is, rendering intelligible. For Warnock's charge to stand, she has to assume the stronger explanatory case.

present-at-hand, a thing with properties and tendencies, but that is the domain of being-in-itself and not for-itself. Sartre begins *Being and Nothingness* by resisting epistemological primacy: one cannot know anything about consciousness without being it. In other words, one's existence precedes essence since one exists as the possibility to transcend the given and posit oneself as what is not Sartre is, on one level, a libertarian because consciousness is uncaused spontaneity and it is this rupture with determinism which makes room for a meaningful account of personal freedom. Yet, this metaphysical freedom is the most basic description of the phenomenon and not Sartrean freedom *per se* as Warnock seems to suggest. Spontaneous consciousness is the conditional possibility of self-determination which is the proper characterisation of the human condition.

Therefore, the original project described in *Being and Nothingness* is not a general theory of human behaviour, it is a description of human existence. Given that self-conscious beings exist as freedom, how is an a priori unity of identity which grounds the synthetic unity of the person possible? One, through self-determination: for consciousness to be self-consciousness it must exist freely through the moments of consciousness. Two, the existence of other consciousnesses is an immediate structure of my being (self-consciousness is immediately aware of its being-for-others or, again, it would be only consciousness without identity) and, as such, I structure "me" as an object for the evaluation of the other. Three, self-consciousness then desires to be a unity open to evaluation, my a priori identity is structured as the attempt to create a synthetic unity (the project). The purpose of the second half of *Being and Nothingness* is, then, an attempt to answer this question: given this universal condition of being human, how are we to understand this particular, synthetic totality (and here one could substitute a proper name: Pierre, Laura)? Sartre is concerned in *Being and Nothingness* to descend from the level of abstraction to concreteness: to show the relationship between self-consciousness as it exists for-itself as isolated, metaphysical freedom and self-consciousness as it exists in the world. The original project characterises the way in which self-consciousness *exists* in the world and not, as Warnock supposes, a way in which we *are* (as, say, the table is brown or a lion is dangerous).

§4.2| The three forms of bad faith

Bad faith is a possible way in which the for-itself can *exist*. It is an attempt to deny the contingency of actions due to some source of meaning prior to choice. The for-itself denies responsibility for who it is and what it has made of itself. In *Being and Nothingness*, bad faith takes three forms: (1) the belief that I am determined by my facticity: the agent assumes that essential, fixed properties limit his possibilities and explain his actions. (2) The belief that I exist most authentically as transcendence, that no matter what you describe as "me", I can negate it. I can negate all my facticity, because I am free. This form of bad faith implicitly denies my being-for-others which is an essential structure of freedom; that is, existing in the world. (3) Finally, the "spirit of seriousness" or binding oneself to a purpose: I am a communist, I am a Christian and my role dictates certain obligations which derive from something external to me. This is described as another way to try and fulfil my project without the anguish of choosing for myself because, as a part of a general movement, my choices are limited by the dictates of that movement.

It is commonly supposed that Sartre's authentic self-consciousness and the self-consciousness of bad faith map snugly on to Heidegger's own authentic and inauthentic Dasein. Dasein, like Sartre's for-itself, has always made some choice about being the way it is (it is responsible for its own facticity) and this choice is authentic when it chooses for itself and inauthentic when it is chosen for. (BT ¶¶9, 27 and 38) Yet, if Sartre's own distinction is supposed to map neatly on this, a problem immediately arises. The first form of bad faith, where I consider myself a thing with properties, is not a case of inauthenticity in Heidegger's sense. Rather, it is to commit an ontological error: one is using categories and descriptions which are simply not apt and any conclusion which is generated will be inapplicable. Sartre, though, is more astute than Heidegger – perhaps because *Being and Nothingness* is anthropology and not a preparatory work for ontology – because he recognises that this ontological error is a way in which self-consciousness often exists. Warnock accuses Sartre of this very error in his description of the original project, but if the human did not exist as a project, then bad faith would not be possible. Bad faith is to think of oneself as a thing with properties and it would be strange if Sartre contradicted himself so brazenly.[18]

[18] Oddly enough this is Heidegger's own criticism of Sartre – and any humanism – because it describes a human as a what rather than a who. See his "Letter on Humanism" in *Basic Writings* D. Krell (ed.), London: Routledge, 1993.

Similarly, the second form of bad faith is puzzling if it is considered with Heidegger's distinction in mind. It is also an ontological error because it is to deny *who* one is – an existence in the world – and to misdescribe human being. If Sartre is solely a libertarian, what sense is one supposed to make of the idea of revelling in transcendence as bad faith, when this is the very freedom which Warnock celebrates? Self-determination is the acceptance of my own facticity and the situation within which I find myself in order to work it over, to make it truly mine. (BN 489; SM 12-13)

The final form of bad faith does neatly map on to Heidegger's distinction and Sartre makes it explicitly moral: one ought not to live in bad faith, one ought to be authentic. His aim in *Being and Nothingness* is not to tell us how to live, though. Bad faith is only possible for a self-determining being and it allows us to discover those structures which constitute a self-determining being. However, within an absurd universe devoid of meaning and value, how is it possible to be authentic? The opposite of bad faith is neither good faith nor sincerity, these are equally erroneous attitudes. The opposite is, and here one hears an echo of Heidegger, authenticity. (BN 70fn) However, there is little hope of an ethics of authenticity in *Being and Nothingness* because Sartre sees social being as wholly alienated, or any political project or collective movement as impossible.[19] Yet, these are the very themes of the later works when he is attempting to extrapolate the psychological concepts into the sphere of sociology.

In the bridge between *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique*, Sartre defines the spirit of seriousness in these words: "The spirit of seriousness is voluntary alienation, that is, submission to an abstraction that justifies one: the thought that man is the inessential and the abstract the essential." (NE 60) The alienation is *voluntary*, that is free in the sense of self-determined, and therefore *authentic*. Where the spirit of seriousness fails is in the rejection of the particular and the individual in favour of the duties of some impersonal, abstract entity. This is the very premise which Sartre will begin the *Critique* from, that is the need to marry existentialist subjectivism with Marxist historicism. *Being and Nothingness* is not a failure, it is incomplete as Sartre himself acknowledges: "… what is impossible at the level of the For-itself and the Project (the ontological organisation of a We) becomes real on the anthropological level of some common work." (NE 130) The incomplete nature of *Being and*

[19] In BN Sartre hints at some authentic attitudes, viz. shame and arrogance (not pride), see 290 and also AJ 90.

Nothingness resides in its consideration of an isolated individual existing in the world, but the third form of bad faith points explicitly towards the need for a sociological and political understanding of man. Ignoring the continuity between the early psychological concepts and the later sociological ones only serves to exaggerate Warnock's supposed contradiction between the idea of freedom and the project.

§5| Is there continuity or rupture in Sartre's thought?

By placing a privilege on Sartre's early works and especially on the metaphysical freedom of consciousness, Warnock, firstly, sees an inconsistency in Sartre's thought between his supposed indeterminism and a deterministic account of human nature; and, secondly, produces a contradiction between her interpretation of freedom and Sartre's own discussion of bad faith. However, if one understands personal freedom as self-determination, a freedom made possible by the metaphysical reality of a spontaneous consciousness but not identical to it, then these two problems dissipate. This advantage in itself is arguably reason enough to accept this interpretation, but there is another aspect to it which affects our understanding of the earlier and the later Sartre. Warnock treats them as two entities diametrically opposed to one another, and she is not the only one.[20] However, the supposed rupture between pre and post *Being and Nothingness* rests on the very idea of freedom against which I have sought to argue. By ignoring the idea of freedom as self-determination and any serious engagement with the later philosophical works, this reading becomes self-perpetuating.

Uncaused spontaneity, or consciousness, is not identical with personal freedom (as Warnock supposes), but is a precondition of it. This reading allows one to climb from a metaphysical account of freedom as indeterminism to an anthropological account of freedom as self-determination. If this is the case, then this anthropological account of freedom must similarly be a pre-condition of a sociological account of freedom found in the pages of *The Critique of Dialectical Freedom*. It would be unreasonable to adequately interrogate this hypothesis without beginning a new article, but I merely wish to show that the concepts in

[20] See PS ch. 6. In her camp one also needs to mention: G. Kline, "The Existentialist Rediscovery of Hegel and Marx" in N. Lee and M. Mandelbaum (eds), Phenomenology and Existentialism Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1967. Amongst those who think Sartre's thought constitutes a continuity, see D. Detmar, *Freedom as a Value* op-cit., T. Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* London: University of Chicago Press, 1984 and M. Grene, *Sartre* New York: New Viewpoints, 1973.

play in Sartre's political and sociological works are both dependent on and an extrapolation of freedom as self-determination in the same way that that idea is both dependent on and an extrapolation of an account of metaphysical indeterminism.

Being and Nothingness does not fulfil the task of offering a complete set of methodological tools for comprehending the synthetic totality of the person – Sartre's attempt at a fundamental psycho-analytic theory is incomplete and he only hints at the possibility of an ethics. This deficiency is not, however, a failure because a full description of the person necessarily requires a sociology and an ethics. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* and the beginning of *Being and Nothingness*, freedom is described from the metaphysical point of view. Sartre is concerned with revealing the structures of freedom in isolation, thus freedom is primarily understood as uncaused spontaneity since this is consistent with the phenomenological approach adopted. This description is a conditional possibility for a person to exist as a project and the idea of freedom as self-determination begins to take hold in parts 3 and 4 of *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre turns his analysis to the significance of the situation and the subject's facticity. Later, in the *Critique*, history too will play a part.

The progressive-regressive method is Sartre's first attempt to truly complete his account of being human. It remains a theory of human nature based upon the free transcendence of one's situation (progressive), yet simultaneously realises that a particular project has to be understood as the negation of a particular situation, facticity or history. As freedom is essentially the for-itself existing as being-for-others, then the way in which it will be free depends on its particular others and not some abstract, universal other. With the progressive-regressive method, Sartre is trying to make his general account of being human applicable to the particular case: "The project has a *meaning*, it is not the simple negativity of flight; by it a man aims at the production of himself in the world as a certain objective totality." (SM 147; see also SM 150-1) Only within a social context, that is the actual structures of being-for-others, can freedom be meaningful rather than absurd. (CDR 334)

The progressive-regressive method can only be applicable to persons if the more fundamental description of human existence is projection. Similarly, freedom within social reality is to be understood as praxis:

> … the "transcendence-immanence" of its members creates the possibility of the group as common action. Pure immanence, indeed, would eliminate the practical organism in favour of a hyper-organism. Or, quite simply, if it were possible for everyone to effect his own integration, every action, in so far as it was common, would lose any possibility of or reason for positing itself as a regulatory action and the group would no longer conceive itself in its *praxis* through innumerable refractions of *the same* operation. In other words, the action would be blind, or would become inertia. Pure transcendence, however, would shatter the practical community into molecules related only by bonds of exteriority and no one would recognise himself in the action or signal of some atomised individual. (CDR 409)

This is the possibility of an ethics, the way in which one can commit oneself to a meaning without falling into the spirit of seriousness. Sartre sets out the conditions of social freedom: it is not wholly immanent, for that would be Humean: to reason to one's ends, but not to choose one's ends (they would be chosen by the group). Neither is it wholly transcendental (metaphysical freedom), for that would be ineffectual: to negate everything, is to negate even possibility. These mirror the first two forms of bad faith. Yet, social freedom is precarious unlike absolute freedom, it must ward off the ever present possibility of inertia, that is becoming the third form of bad faith, viz. the spirit of seriousness (or seriality). In fact, the bad faith of the *Critique* maps neatly on to the authentic/inauthentic distinction that was described earlier: when historical necessity is able to furnish a complete explanation it does so through an ontological error in that the self is assumed to be substance and this myth is perpetuated by other freedoms (oppressing classes, the system solidified, etc.): freedom is still the only limit to my freedom. The agent is in bad faith because he has not chosen himself, he is not his own product. It is this very contradiction between how I exist (praxis) and what I am (the practico-inert) which fuels the movement towards the future. The constant worry in the *Critique* that authentic praxis may become the pratico-inert arises from Sartre's assertion that for freedom to be meaningful it has to occur in objective or historical structures. Freedom as self-determination remains at the heart of Sartre's enterprise. (CDR 339-431)

Without his psychological concepts, the basis of praxis as a sociological theory of action would be woefully incomplete. More than any other, the idea of freedom as self-determination is crucial in that the characterisation of praxis remains that I, as individual, am

responsible for what I (and what we) make of myself (ourselves): it is because man can negate what is, because he is free to choose himself, that the negative conception of the world "it is impossible that there is no better society or way of things" provides the motor of change as an implicit "the world ought to be thus" in the future. (CDR 330) The idea of freedom as self-determination not only solves certain inconsistencies which arise if one shares Warnock's belief that Sartre is a libertarian, it also dissolves the idea that he undergoes a radical conversion from existentialism to Marxism. If one understands freedom as self-determination, it is possible to see how the sociological concepts of Sartre's later texts are dependent upon his existentialist origins, even if such a claim requires much more argument in order to be fully convincing.

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